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ABSTRACT

The teen court concept has gained popularity in recent years as juvenile courts have had to deal with increased numbers of serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders. Its acceptance has been fueled, in part, by positive anecdotal reports from those involved with this peer-centered approach. Growing from a handful of programs in the 1960s, the number of teen courts (or youth courts) now operating in the United States has been estimated to be as high as 675. Communities across the nation continue to demand better information and assistance with which to start or enhance their own teen courts. This bulletin aims to help address that demand by providing information about the characteristics of established teen courts and the operational and managerial challenges they face. It also summarizes the evaluation literature on teen courts. The bulletin provides a background overview; explains the teen court concept; and discusses a national survey conducted by the Urban Institute. (Contains 9 figures, 5 tables, and 19 references.) (BT)

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

OJJDP
John J. Wilson, Acting Administrator
October 2000
JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Teen Courts: A Focus on Research

Jeffrey A. Butts and Janeen Buck

Growing from a handful of programs in the 1960's, the number of teen courts (or youth courts) now operating in the United States has been estimated to be as high as 675. Communities across the Nation continue to demand better information and assistance with which to start or enhance their own teen courts. This Bulletin helps to address that demand by providing information about the characteristics of established teen courts and the operational and managerial challenges they face. It also summarizes the evaluation literature on teen courts.

Background

Teen courts are spreading rapidly across the United States. Many people view them as a cost-effective alternative to traditional juvenile court for some young offenders. Until recently, relatively little information has been available about how teen courts operate or how they affect youthful offenders. This Bulletin presents the results of a national survey of teen courts. The findings suggest that most teen courts are relatively small and were established very recently. The findings also suggest that the most established teen court programs (i.e., programs reporting longevity in operations and/or little financial uncertainty) may be those that are housed within or closely affiliated with the traditional juvenile justice system.

The survey indicates that teen courts enjoy broad community support. Their popularity appears to stem from favorable media coverage and the high levels of satisfaction reported by parents, teachers, and youth involved in teen court programs, rather than from evaluation research showing that teen courts have beneficial effects on offenders. Little research has been conducted on outcomes for teen court defendants, although some studies offer encouraging results. Recent studies have found that teen court participation may be associated with low recidivism rates, improved youth attitudes toward authority, and increased knowledge of the justice system among youth. More research is required before claims about teen court effectiveness can be substantiated.

The Teen Court Concept

Teen courts are generally used for younger juveniles (ages 10 to 15), those with no prior arrest records, and those charged with less serious law violations (e.g., shoplifting, vandalism, and disorderly conduct). Typically, young offenders are offered teen court as a voluntary alternative in lieu of more formal handling by the traditional juvenile justice system (see figure 1). Teen courts differ from

From the Administrator

Developed as an alternative to the traditional juvenile court system for younger and less serious offenders, teen courts operate on the premise that the judgment of a juvenile offender's peers may have a greater impact than the decisions of adult authority figures.

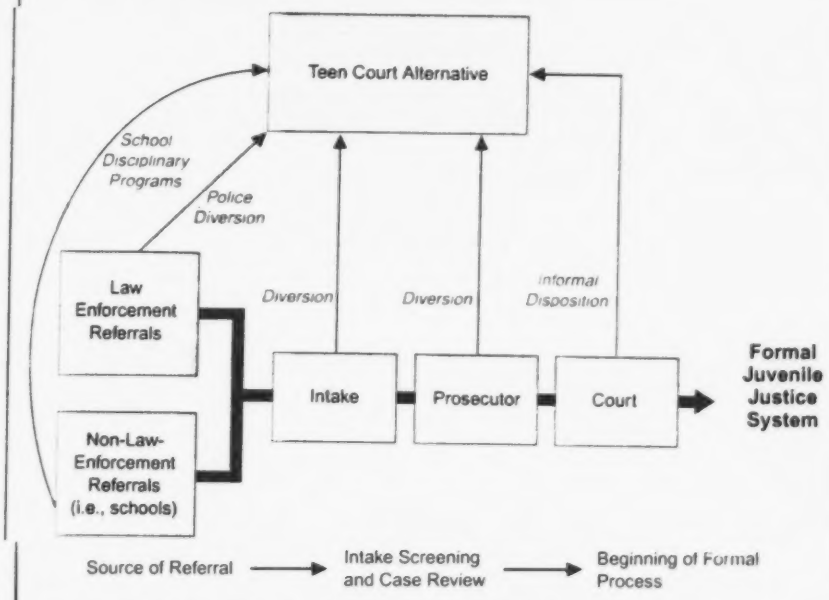
The teen court concept has gained popularity in recent years as juvenile courts have had to deal with increased numbers of serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders. Its acceptance has been fueled, in part, by positive anecdotal reports from those involved with this peer-centered approach. This Bulletin examines several teen court evaluations, but cautions that we lack the empirical data needed to fully evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention.

In keeping with its commitment to identifying "what works," OJJDP is funding the Evaluation of Teen Courts Project. This Bulletin includes a profile of teen court characteristics and implementation challenges, derived from a national survey of teen courts conducted in the project's first phase. Phase two will consist of a multisite evaluation.

Until the findings of that evaluation are available next year, I hope that communities considering the merits of teen courts will find this Bulletin to be a useful interim guide.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator

Figure 1: Points at Which Juvenile Offenders Can Be Diverted to Teen Court



Source: The Urban Institute. Evaluation of Teen Courts Project.

other juvenile justice programs because young people rather than adults determine the disposition, given a broad array of sentencing options made available by adults overseeing the program. Teen court defendants may go through an intake process, a preliminary review of charges, a court hearing, and sentencing, as in a regular juvenile court. In a teen court, however, other young people are responsible for much of the process. Charges may be presented to the court by a 15-year-old "prosecutor." Defendants may be represented by a 16-year-old "defense attorney." Other youth may serve as jurors, court clerks, and bailiffs. In some teen courts, a youth "judge" (or panel of youth judges) may choose the best disposition or sanction for each case. In a few teen courts, youth even determine whether the facts in a case have been proven by the prosecutor (similar to a finding of guilt).

Adults are also involved in teen courts. They often administer the programs, and they are usually responsible for essential functions such as budgeting, planning, and personnel. In many programs, adults supervise the courtroom activities, and they often coordinate the community service placements where youth work to fulfill the terms of their dispositions. In some programs, adults act as the judges while teens serve as attorneys and jurors. The key to all teen court programs, however, is the significant role youth play in the deliberation of charges and the imposition of sanctions on young offenders.

Proponents of teen court argue that the process takes advantage of one of the most powerful forces in the life of an adolescent—the desire for peer approval and the reaction to peer pressure. According to this argument, youth respond better to prosocial peers than to adult authority figures. Thus, teen courts are seen as a potentially effective alternative to traditional juvenile courts staffed with paid professionals such as lawyers, judges, and probation officers. Teen court advocates also point out that the benefits extend beyond defendants. Teen courts may benefit the volunteer youth attorneys and judges, who probably learn more about the legal system than they ever could in a classroom. The presence of a teen court may also encourage the entire community to take a more active role in responding to juvenile crime. Teen courts offer at least four potential benefits:

About the Evaluation of Teen Courts Project

The Urban Institute's Evaluation of Teen Courts (ETC) Project is studying four teen court programs: Anchorage Youth Court in Anchorage, AK; Teen Court of the Tempe Justice Court in Maricopa County, AZ; Montgomery County Teen Court in Rockville, MD; and Independence Youth Court in Independence, MO. These programs were selected to maximize (1) the number of courtroom models used by the programs involved in the study, (2) the mix of geographic locations, and (3) the overall quality and length of service of each program.

In each jurisdiction, youth whose cases are handled in teen court are being compared with those who enter the traditional juvenile justice system. The project is measuring the extent to which teen court outcomes differ from outcomes that might result if the cases of youth similar to those diverted to teen court were handled using normal procedures, including the dismissal of charges or informal adjustment. Outcomes include postprogram recidivism and changes in the teen's perceptions of the justice system (e.g., respect for authority or trust in police).

The evaluation is investigating a variety of teen court models. Some of the courts in the study use adult judges, while others use only youth judges. Some are authorized to determine a youth's guilt, while others only impose dispositions on juveniles who have previously admitted their guilt. The purpose of the evaluation is not to select one model over another but to establish a baseline of outcome information for the range of teen court models now being used throughout the country.

- **Accountability.** Teen courts may help to ensure that young offenders are held accountable for their illegal behavior, even when their offenses are relatively minor and would not likely result in sanctions from the traditional juvenile justice system.
- **Timeliness.** An effective teen court can move young offenders from arrest to sanctions within a matter of days

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rather than the months that may pass with traditional juvenile courts. This rapid response may increase the positive impact of court sanctions, regardless of their severity.

- **Cost savings.** Teen courts usually depend heavily on youth and adult volunteers. If managed properly, they may handle a substantial number of offenders at relatively little cost to the community. The average annual cost for operating a teen court is $32,822 (National Youth Court Center, unpublished data).
- **Community cohesion.** A well-structured and expansive teen court program may affect the entire community by increasing public appreciation of the legal system, enhancing community-court relationships, encouraging greater respect for the law among youth, and promoting volunteerism among both adults and youth.

Researchers are beginning to report instances in which these potential benefits have been realized in some communities, but evaluation research on teen courts is still in the early stages. It is too soon to tell whether the positive results reported by some communities can be replicated reliably in other communities. Regardless of the limited evidence, however, teen courts are increasingly in use across the United States. This Bulletin describes the variety of teen courts and summarizes what researchers know about the effects of teen court programs.

National Survey

As part of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Evaluation of Teen Courts Project, The Urban Institute recently conducted a national survey of teen courts and youth courts. With assistance from the National Youth Court Center (NYCC), which is housed at the American Probation and Parole Association and supported by funds from OJJDP, project researchers obtained addresses, telephone numbers, and personal contacts for all U.S. teen courts believed to exist as of the end of 1998, and they mailed questionnaires to nearly 500 programs. A handful of these programs had gone out of business by the time researchers tried to contact them. Of the remaining programs, 335 (more than 70 percent) completed and returned the survey. The responses documented the range of teen court programs used by jurisdictions across the country, the characteristics of their clients, the sanctions they imposed, the courtroom models they used, the extent of community support they received, and the challenges they faced.

Program Characteristics

Recent growth in the number of teen court programs nationwide was reflected in the brief tenure of the programs responding to the national survey. Of all the programs that responded, 13 percent had been in operation less than 1 year and 42 percent had been in operation for only 1 to 3 years. More than two-thirds (67 percent) of all teen courts had been in existence for less than 5 years (see figure 2).

Many teen courts that responded to the survey were closely affiliated with the traditional justice system (see figure 3). Courts, law enforcement agencies, juvenile probation offices, or prosecutors' offices operated slightly more than half (52 percent) of the programs responding to the survey. More than one-third (37 percent) of the programs were affiliated with the courts and 12 percent with law enforcement. Private agencies operated one-quarter (25 percent) of the teen court programs.

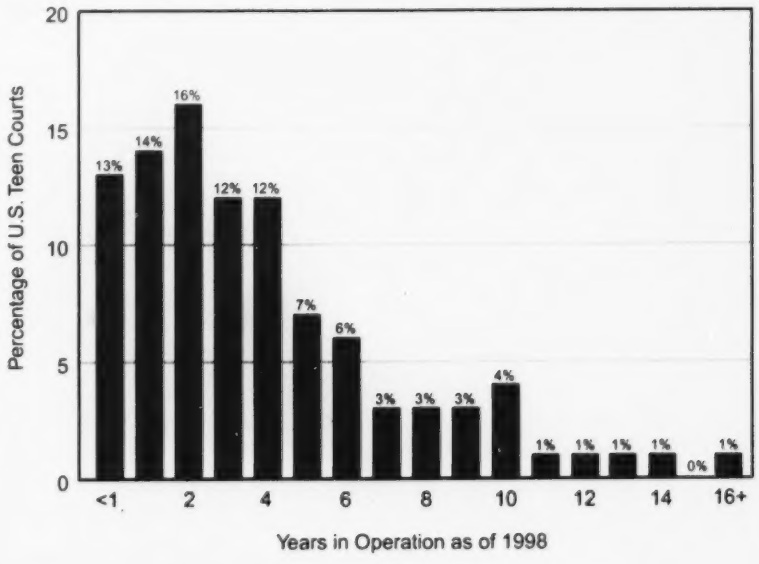
Most teen court and youth court programs were relatively small (see figure 4). More than half (59 percent) of the programs responding to the survey handled 100 or fewer cases annually. Just 13 percent of the programs handled more than 300 cases per year.

Very few programs relied on private funding to meet their operational costs (see figure 5). More than half (59 percent) of the teen courts received no private funding; 16 percent of the programs received up to one-fifth of their funding from private sources, and 11 percent received between one-fifth and one-half from private sources.

Client Characteristics

Teen courts usually handle relatively young offenders with no prior arrests. Survey respondents reported that, on average, 24 percent of their cases involved youth under age 14 and 66 percent involved youth under age 16. More than one-third (39 percent) of the teen courts accepted only first-time offenders and another 48 percent reported that they "rarely" accepted youth with prior arrest records. Nearly all programs (98 percent) reported that they "never" or "rarely" accepted youth with prior felony arrests. Most programs (91 percent) also indicated that they "never" or "rarely"

Figure 2: Years Teen Courts Had Been in Operation as of 1998



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

accepted youth who previously had been referred to a juvenile court.

To assess the nature of those cases typically handled in teen court, the survey asked each program to review a list of offenses and to indicate whether the program received such cases "very often," "often," "rarely," or "never." The offenses most likely to be received "often" or "very often" were theft (93 percent), minor assault (66 percent), disorderly conduct (62 percent), possession or use of alcohol (60 percent), and vandalism (59 percent) (see figure 6).

Sanctions

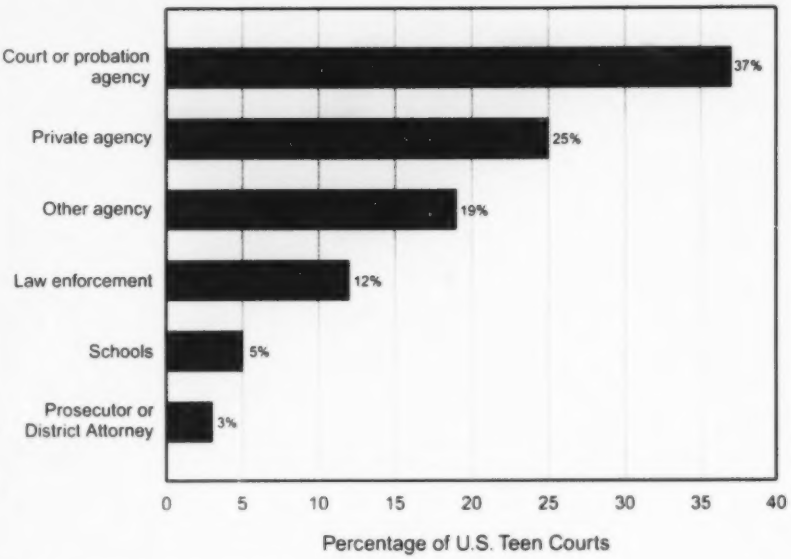
The principal goal of teen court is to hold young offenders accountable for their behavior. In a system of graduated sanctions, there is a consequence for every offense. Every youth who has admitted guilt or who is found guilty in teen court receives some form of sanction. In many communities, teen court sanctions do more than punish the offender. Sanctions encourage young offenders to repair at least part of the damage they have caused to the community or to specific victims. Offenders are often ordered to pay restitution or perform community service. Some teen courts require offenders to write formal apologies to their victims; others require offenders to serve on a subsequent teen court jury. Many courts use other innovative dispositions, such as requiring offenders to attend classes designed to improve their decisionmaking skills, enhance their awareness of victims, and deter them from future theft.

Survey respondents were asked to assess a list of typical sanctions and indicate how frequently the program used each one (i.e., "very often," "often," "rarely," or "never"). Community service was the most commonly used sanction (see figure 7). Nearly all (99 percent) of responding teen courts reported using community service "often" or "very often." Other frequently used sanctions included victim apology letters (86 percent), written essays (79 percent), teen court jury duty (74 percent), drug/alcohol classes (60 percent), and restitution (34 percent).

Courtroom Models

NYCC divides the courtroom approaches used by teen courts into four types (described in table 1): adult judge, youth judge, peer jury, and youth tribunal (National Youth Court Center, 2000). Findings

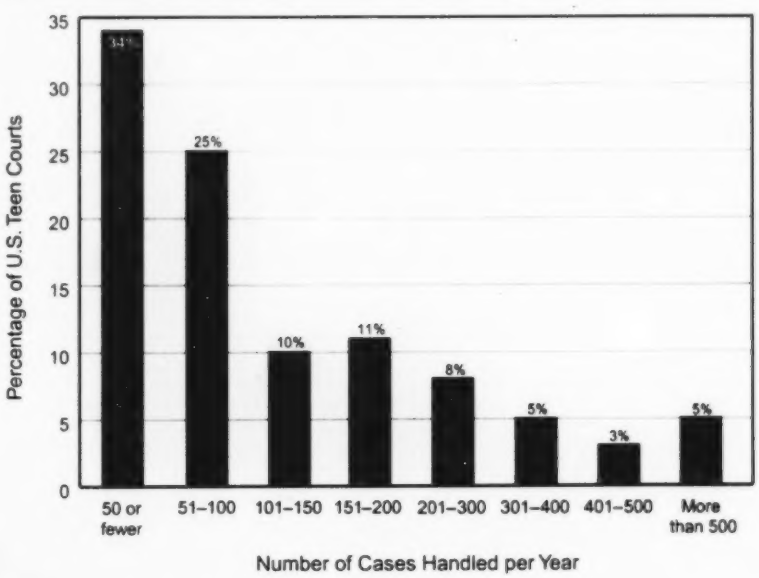
Figure 3: Entities That Operate Teen Courts



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

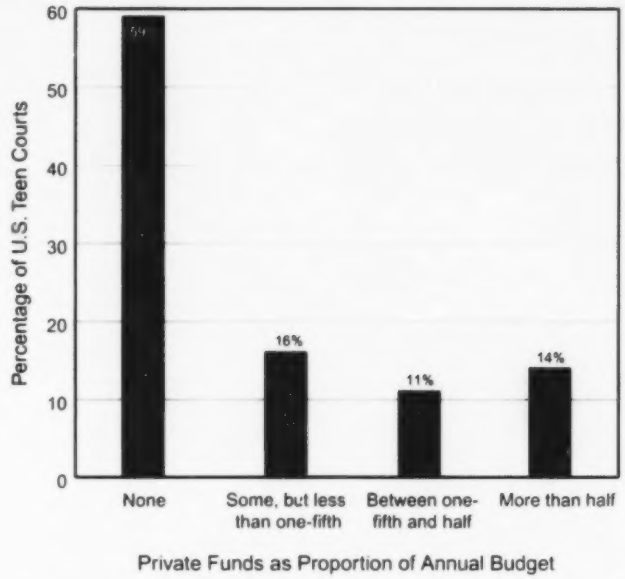
Figure 4: Number of Cases Handled by Teen Courts Each Year



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

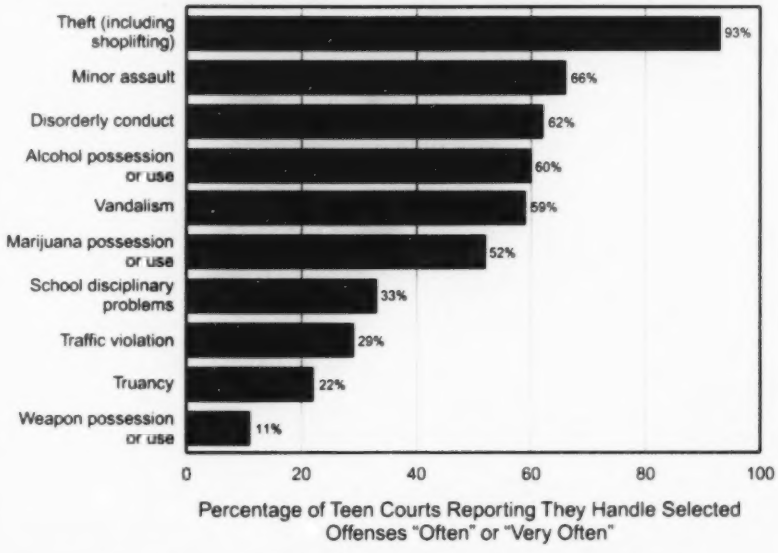
Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

Figure 5: Percentage of Teen Court Budgets Provided by Private Funds



Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

Figure 6: Offenses Handled in Teen Court



Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

from the national survey suggested that the adult judge model was the most popular. Nearly half (47 percent) of the responding courts used only the adult judge model. When the number of cases handled by adult judges in programs using a mix of courtroom models was added, the adult judge model accounted for more than half (60 percent) of all teen court cases.

The next most prevalent courtroom model was the peer jury, which accounted for 22 percent of all teen court cases. More than one in four (26 percent) teen court programs used this model for at least part of their caseloads. The youth judge and tribunal models were the least used, with each accounting for just 7 percent of all cases.

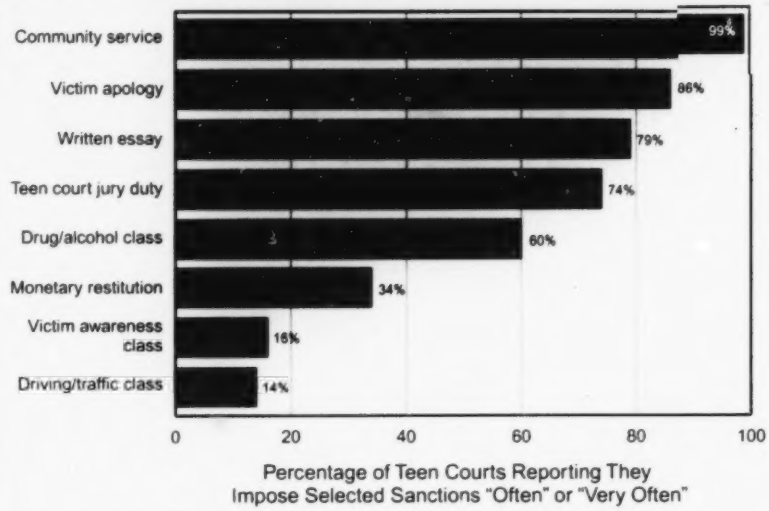
The use of courtroom models varied somewhat according to the agency sponsoring the program (see table 2). The adult judge model was the most popular among teen courts operated by local courts and probation agencies (58 percent) and those hosted by schools, private agencies, and other not-for-profit organizations (48 percent). There was no dominant model, however, among programs operated by law enforcement agencies or prosecutors. In fact, more than one-third (34 percent) of those programs used mixed models (i.e., a combination of two or more courtroom models).

Differences by courtroom model. The characteristics of teen courts were notably different when the analysis controlled for courtroom model (see table 3). For example, programs using the youth judge model were among the newest teen court programs. Fewer than one-fifth (19 percent) of these programs had been in operation for 5 years or more, compared with 31 percent of adult judge programs, 35 percent of programs using peer juries, and 34 percent of programs using the youth tribunal model. Most (58 percent) youth judge programs had been in operation for less than 2 years at the time of the survey.

Youth judge programs were also the smallest programs in terms of their annual caseloads. Only 14 percent of programs using the youth judge model reported more than 100 cases per year, compared with 40 percent of programs using the adult judge model and 38 percent of programs using peer juries.

Programs using the peer jury model were the least likely to depend on private funding. Nearly four-fifths (78 percent) of peer jury programs received no private funding and only 13 percent received more than one-third of their funding from private sources. For most other courtroom models, nearly half of the programs responding to the survey reported receiving some private funding (i.e., 45 percent of adult judge programs, 47 percent of youth

Figure 7: Sanctions Imposed by Teen Courts



Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

judge programs, and 48 percent of youth tribunal programs).

Programs using the youth judge and youth tribunal models were more likely to allow juveniles to plead innocence or guilt and to hold trials. About one-third (35 percent) of programs using the youth judge model and 44 percent of those using the youth tribunal model held trials.

About 80 percent of teen court programs responding to the survey had a paid, full-time or part-time program director. Programs using the peer jury model were least likely to have paid program directors (58 percent). Likewise, these programs were least likely to operate during the summer months (53 percent).

Teen Court Facts

- Thirteen percent of teen courts are authorized to hold trials (youth can deny charges).
- Eighty percent of teen courts have paid program directors.
- Thirty-nine percent of teen courts accept only first-time offenders.
- Seventy-three percent of teen courts operate throughout the year.

Of the four major program models, youth tribunal programs were the most likely to accept referrals for youth with prior arrest records. Only 28 percent of programs using the youth tribunal model reported that they would "never" accept youth with prior arrests, compared with at least 40 percent for all other program models. Just 39 percent of tribunal programs indicated that they would "never" accept youth with prior juvenile court referrals, compared with 50 percent or more among the other types of teen court models.

Community Support

The success of an individual teen court may depend on how well it is supported by various segments of the community. Teen court advocates have observed that it is essential for teen courts to be accepted by the larger

Table 1: Characteristics of Four Courtroom Models Used by Teen Courts

	Courtroom Model			
Characteristic	**Adult Judge**	**Youth Judge**	**Peer Jury**	**Youth Tribunal**
Judge	Adult	Youth	Adult (limited role)	Youth (often 3)
Youth attorneys	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Role of the youth jury, if any	Recommends disposition	Recommends disposition	Questions defendant, recommends disposition	No jury
Percentage of teen courts using this model for all cases	47%	9%	12%	10%
Percentage of teen courts using this model for at least some cases	64	13	26	12
Percentage of teen court cases handled using this model	60	7	22	7

Note: In the national survey, the combination of the adult judge, youth judge, peer jury, and youth tribunal models accounted for 96 percent of all cases handled by responding programs. The remaining 4 percent were handled with other models, often variations of the more established models (e.g., youth tribunal with no prosecutor or defense attorney). The four courtroom models were first described by the National Youth Court Center, American Probation and Parole Association.

Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

Table 2: Percentage of Teen Courts Using Each Courtroom Model, by Sponsoring Agency

Courtroom Model	Total (n=330)	Administrative Host: Court/ Probation Agency (n=121)	Police/ Prosecutor (n=50)	School/Private Agency/Other (n=159)
Adult judge	47%	58%	16%	48%
Youth judge	9	4	12	13
Peer jury	12	18	14	6
Youth tribunal	10	3	24	10
Mixed models	22	17	34	23

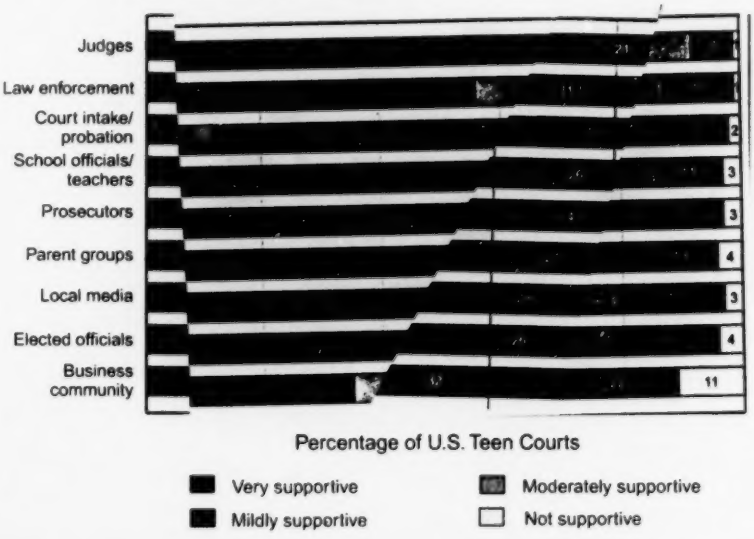
Notes: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding; n=number of respondents.

Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

justice system in their local area (National Youth Court Center, 2000). To examine teen court program directors' perceptions of community support for their programs, the survey asked each program to consider several prominent community groups and indicate whether each was "very supportive," "moderately supportive," "mildly supportive," or "not at all supportive" (see figure 8).

Judges were seen as the greatest supporters of teen court programs. More than 9 in 10 teen courts rated their local judges as "very supportive" (71 percent) or "moderately supportive" (21 percent). Other groups considered "very supportive" or "moderately supportive" of teen courts included law enforcement (87 percent), court intake and probation workers (86 percent), teachers and other school officials (86 percent), and prosecutors (84 percent). In general, teen courts perceived all of the named groups to be supportive. Even the groups ranking lowest on the list (elected officials and the business community) were considered by a majority of teen courts as either very or moderately supportive (78 and 67 percent, respectively).

Figure 8: Perceived Levels of Support for Teen Court Programs From Community Groups



Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

Problems

As small, community-based programs, teen courts face a range of challenges and obstacles. To identify the type of problems facing teen courts, the survey asked each program to review a list of typical operational problems that might cause difficulties for teen courts. Each court was asked to indicate whether it had experienced the issue as a "serious" problem, a "minor" problem, something in between, or not a problem at all (see figure 9).

Not surprisingly, the operational problem reported most often by teen courts was funding (see figure 9). Forty percent of the programs reported "some problems" (25 percent) or "serious problems" (15 percent) with funding uncertainties. Only 38 percent of the programs reported that funding uncertainties caused no problems.

Other problems that presented significant challenges for teen courts included retaining youth volunteers (i.e., attorneys, judges, and jurors) and maintaining an adequate flow of referrals. More than one-fifth (21 percent) of the programs reported having "some" problems or "serious" problems keeping teen volunteers. Nearly one-third (29 percent) reported having "some" or "serious" problems with maintaining sufficient case referrals.

Several other issues were described as presenting "some" or "serious" problems for teen courts. These issues included cases in which too much time elapsed between a youth's arrest and his or her referral to teen court (19 percent), difficulties in coordinating the efforts of teen courts with other agencies in the community (16 percent), and problems recruiting youth volunteers (19 percent) and adult volunteers (20 percent).

Differences by program characteristics. The extent to which teen courts reported having problems in meeting specific challenges varied according to other program characteristics. Some differences were statistically significant. For example, teen courts operated by schools or private agencies were significantly more likely to report problems with funding uncertainties (see table 4). Among programs operated by private agencies and schools, 79 percent reported at least some problems

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Table 3: Selected Characteristics, by Courtroom Models Used by Teen Courts

Characteristics	Total (*n*=332)	Courtroom Model: Adult Judge (*n*=156)	Youth Judge (*n*=31)	Peer Jury (*n*=40)	Youth Tribunal (*n*=32)	Mixed Models (*n*=73)
Years in operation						
Less than 2	31%	33%	58%	20%	38%	19%
2 to 4	37	36	23	45	28	48
5 or more	31	31	19	35	34	33
Total annual caseload (cases/year)						
50 or fewer	34%	36%	62%	44%	31%	12%
51 to 100	25	24	24	18	44	22
More than 100	42	40	14	38	25	66
Sponsoring agency						
Court/probation agency	37%	45%	16%	56%	13%	27%
Police/prosecutor	15	5	19	18	38	23
School/private agency/other	48	50	65	26	50	49
Private funding sources						
None	59%	55%	53%	78%	52%	62%
Less than 1/3 of budget	21	22	27	10	35	19
More than 1/3 of budget	20	23	20	13	13	19
Authority to hold trials						
No—youth must admit to charges	87%	97%	65%	85%	56%	89%
Yes—able to hold full trials	13	3	35	15	44	11
Paid program director						
No	20%	19%	16%	43%	22%	8%
Yes	80	81	84	58	78	92
Operation during summer						
No	27%	31%	23%	48%	13%	14%
Yes	73	69	77	53	88	86
Youth with prior arrests accepted						
Never	39%	41%	42%	45%	28%	32%
Rarely	49	45	52	38	53	61
Often or very often	13	14	6	18	19	7
Youth with prior juvenile court referrals accepted						
Never	50%	50%	58%	51%	39%	49%
Rarely	41	42	35	33	48	44
Often or very often	9	9	7	15	13	7

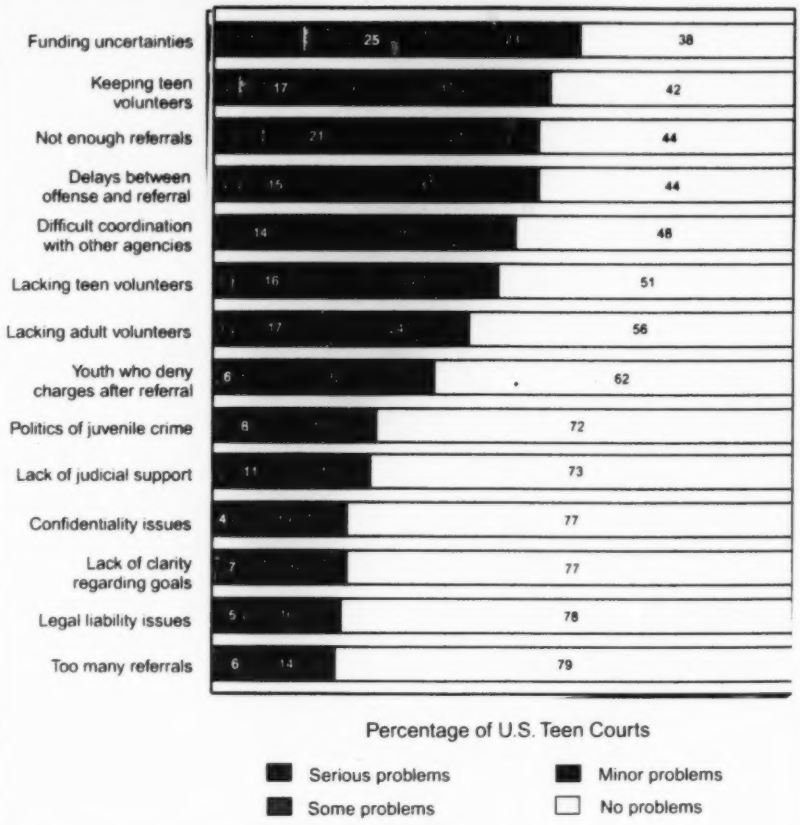
Notes: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding; *n*=number of respondents.

Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

with funding, compared with 44 percent of programs operated by courts and 49 percent operated by law enforcement or prosecutors. Teen courts operated by schools or private agencies were also significantly more likely than programs run by courts, law enforcement, or prosecutors to report problems with a lack of judicial support (38 percent) and difficulties coordinating with other agencies (63 percent).

Smaller programs were somewhat more likely than larger programs to report problems with a lack of judicial support and with a lack of clear program goals. More than one-quarter (28 percent) of teen courts that handled fewer than 50 cases per year reported having problems with goal clarity, compared with 15 percent of programs that handled more than 100 cases each year.

Figure 9: Extent of Problems Reported by Teen Courts



Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

The length of time that teen courts had been in operation was also associated with problems regarding the clarity of their goals. Programs less than 2 years old were significantly more likely than programs in operation for 5 or more years to report having problems with goal clarity and with issues surrounding legal liability.

Finally, programs that relied heavily on private funds (often those operated by private agencies) were significantly more likely than those that did not rely heavily on such funds to report a lack of judicial support, coordination difficulties, a lack of adult volunteers, and problems with retaining youth volunteers. Programs that depended on private funding were also significantly more likely to report problems with heavy caseloads. Among programs that received more than one-third of their funding from private sources, 35 percent reported problems stemming from too many referrals, compared with 16 percent of programs that received no private funding.

Evaluation Research

Despite broad and growing interest in teen courts, only a few studies have attempted to measure their effect on youth, and even the best of these studies have not yet produced the sort of evaluation data necessary to deem a program effective. Juvenile justice officials and practitioners generally praise teen courts, but these claims remain largely unsubstantiated. The Evaluation of Teen Courts Project conducted a comprehensive review of evaluation studies (published and unpublished) conducted in the past 20 years. These studies examined teen and youth court programs in States including California, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, and Texas. All of the studies were limited in scope and methodology, but together they offered insight to an essential question for State and local officials, "Do teen courts work?"

Recidivism

Recidivism would seem to be an obvious focus for evaluation studies of teen courts, but only a handful of evaluations have measured postprogram recidivism (see table 5). Most studies have relied on court records and official police data to detect recidivism. Few studies have attempted to collect personal data from teen court defendants. Only Swink's (1998) study of a teen court program in Onondaga County, NY, measured self-reported recidivism, and it relied on parents to report the illegal activities of their children.

Of the few studies that measured official recidivism, some found very low rates of reoffending among former youth court defendants. Several researchers found rates of postprogram recidivism that ranged from 3 to 8 percent within 6 to 12 months of appearance in teen court (Butler-Mejia, 1998; McNeece et al., 1996; SRA Associates, 1995). A few studies found recidivism rates in excess of 20 or 30 percent. One Texas study, for example, found that 24 percent of former youth court participants reoffended (Hissong, 1991). Minor and his colleagues found that nearly one-third (32 percent) of teen court youth reoffended within 1 year (Minor et al., 1999). It is not possible to say whether these higher rates are anomalies. Existing teen court evaluations are so different in scope and design that it is often impossible to compare the findings of one with another.

Most evaluations of teen court recidivism have employed relatively simple research designs. Even some of the best studies (Minor et al., 1999; LoGalbo, 1998; Swink, 1998; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998) have relied on data from a single group of teen court cases at a single point in time. Often, researchers have failed to use comparison groups or pre- and postmeasures. Thus, it is impossible to test the assumption that recidivism outcomes are due to teen court rather than to other factors (e.g., the type of youth selected for teen court may be unlikely to recidivate).

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Table 4: Operational Problems, by Characteristics of Teen Court Programs

Extent of Problem	Total (n=335)	Sponsoring Agency: Court (n=121)	Police, DA (n=51)	School, Private (n=159)	Annual Caseload (number of cases): Fewer Than 50 (n=109)	50 to 100 (n=80)	More Than 100 (n=135)	Years in Operation: Less Than 2 (n=105)	2 to 4 (n=125)	5 or More (n=104)	Percentage of Private Funding: None (n=193)	1-33% (n=70)	More Than 33% (n=64)
Funding uncertainties													
Not a problem	38%	56%	51%	21%	43%	30%	39%	32%	35%	47%	51%	22%	16%
Minor problem	23	19	20	26	16	28	22	23	23	21	21	23	25
Definite problem*	40	25	29	53	41	42	39	45	42	32	28	55	59
		χ^2=40.75; p<0.01							r=-0.12; p<0.05			r=0.33; p<0.01	
Lack of judicial support													
Not a problem	73%	88%	76%	62%	67%	79%	76%	71%	66%	83%	80%	71%	58%
Minor problem	15	9	14	18	15	11	16	14	16	13	11	14	20
Definite problem	12	3	10	20	18	10	8	14	18	4	9	14	22
		χ^2=24.95; p<0.01			r=-0.12; p<0.05			r=-0.13; p<0.05			r=0.19; p<0.01		
Legal liability issues													
Not a problem	78%	86%	80%	72%	82%	78%	74%	67%	80%	86%	84%	67%	75%
Minor problem	16	11	14	20	12	15	20	21	17	9	13	20	17
Definite problem	6	3	6	8	6	8	5	12	3	5	3	13	8
								r=-0.18; p<0.01			r=0.14; p<0.05		
Lack of clear goals													
Not a problem	77%	76%	86%	75%	72%	71%	85%	63%	82%	84%	79%	71%	80%
Minor problem	8	16	8	17	17	23	10	24	11	13	13	21	14
Definite problem	15	8	6	8	11	6	5	13	7	3	8	9	6
					r=-0.13; p<0.05			r=-0.20; p<0.01					
Difficulties coordinating with other agencies													
Not a problem	48%	57%	60%	37%	48%	47%	49%	45%	49%	49%	53%	38%	41%
Minor problem	36	29	32	44	34	39	38	38	36	36	34	46	36
Definite problem	16	14	8	19	18	14	13	17	15	15	13	16	23
		χ^2=14.58; p<0.01										r=0.14; p<0.05	
Lacking adult volunteers													
Not a problem	56%	63%	64%	48%	59%	49%	56%	56%	54%	58%	63%	41%	48%
Minor problem	24	22	14	29	17	32	26	26	22	26	22	32	23
Definite problem	20	15	22	23	24	19	18	18	25	16	14	27	28
												r=0.17; p<0.01	

Only three published studies (Hissong, 1991; North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts, 1995; Seyfrit, Reichel, and Stutts, 1987) have used reasonably appropriate comparison groups to measure the possible effects of teen courts on recidivism (see table 5). Hissong's evaluation of an Arlington, TX, teen court compared recidivism among teen court defendants with a group of non-teen-court participants matched on sex, race, age, and offense. The analysis suggested that teen court participants were significantly less likely to reoffend than the comparison group (24 percent versus 36 percent). Several important elements of the study, however, were poorly documented. The definition of recidivism used in the analysis (presumably rearrest) is unclear. The duration of the followup period is not described (subjects may have had different periods of risk), and there is a range of unexplored potential differences between the treatment group and the comparison group.

The North Carolina study used a comparison group that consisted of 97 cases diverted by police during a 6-month period prior to implementation of the teen court in Cumberland, NC. Researchers hypothesized that these youth would have been referred to teen court had the program been in existence. Teen court and comparison group cases were matched using several factors, including demographic characteristics and offense type, and researchers tracked the recidivism of both groups. The study failed to find statistically significant differences in the recidivism of the two groups. In fact, the analysis seemed to favor the comparison group. After 7 months, 20 percent of teen court participants had reoffended, compared with just 9 percent of the comparison group. The study also found little difference between the two groups in average time before a new offense (4.1 months for teen court offenders versus 4.6 months for the comparison group). Youth who successfully completed the teen court program were less likely to reoffend than were youth who began but failed to complete the program (11 percent compared with 42 percent), but this finding may reflect the greater tendency of low-risk youth to complete the program.

Seyfrit and her colleagues (1987) tracked recidivism outcomes for 52 youth referred to a Columbia County, GA, teen court

Table 4: Operational Problems, by Characteristics of Teen Court Programs (continued)

Extent of Problem	Total (*n*=335)	Sponsoring Agency: Court (*n*=121)	Police, DA (*n*=51)	School, Private (*n*=159)	Annual Caseload (number of cases): Fewer Than 50 (*n*=109)	50 to 100 (*n*=80)	More Than 100 (*n*=135)	Years in Operation: Less Than 2 (*n*=105)	2 to 4 (*n*=125)	5 or More (*n*=104)	Percentage of Private Funding: None (*n*=193)	1-33% (*n*=70)	More Than 33% (*n*=64)
Lacking teen volunteers													
Not a problem	51%	58%	43%	48%	54%	53%	45%	52%	46%	56%	55%	46%	44%
Minor problem	30	25	29	32	25	31	34	27	34	27	26	33	36
Definite problem	20	17	28	20	21	16	21	21	21	17	19	21	20
Keeping teen volunteers													
Not a problem	42%	44%	45%	39%	45%	38%	38%	42%	41%	41%	48%	36%	32%
Minor problem	37	41	29	37	31	38	43	36	36	41	33	41	41
Definite problem	21	15	26	25	24	24	19	22	23	18	19	23	27
												r=0.13; p<0.05	
Too many referrals													
Not a problem	79%	85%	76%	75%	87%	73%	74%	82%	79%	73%	85%	75%	65%
Minor problem	14	8	14	19	9	22	15	13	15	16	10	17	25
Definite problem	7	7	10	6	4	5	11	5	6	11	6	7	10
					r=0.15; p<0.01							r=0.16; p<0.01	
Not enough referrals													
Not a problem	44%	45%	48%	43%	28%	43%	59%	39%	46%	48%	43%	51%	40%
Minor problem	27	30	27	26	29	31	24	26	26	30	29	26	22
Definite problem	29	26	25	32	43	26	17	36	28	22	28	22	38
					r=-0.30; p<0.01			r=-0.11; p<0.05					

Notes: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. DA=District Attorney; *n*=number of respondents. *Chi*-square ("χ^2") measures the extent to which the values of one variable are systematically different across the categories of one or more variables. Probability ("*p*") measures the likelihood that a statistical relationship is due to chance. Typically, a relationship between two variables is considered statistically significant when the probability is less than 0.05. The correlation coefficient ("*r*") indicates the strength of association between two variables and ranges from –1.0 (strong inverse relationship) to +1.0 (strong positive relationship).

*Includes responses of "some problems" and "serious problems."

Source: The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts.

during an 18-month period in the early 1980's. They also collected data for a comparison group of 50 youth matched on demographics and offenses. The study found little difference between the two groups. Although 12 percent of the comparison group recidivated during the followup period, the same was true for 10 percent of the teen court defendants. Like the North Carolina study, the Seyfrit study was unable to control statistically for different periods of opportunity to reoffend. The followup periods ranged from 6 to 18 months, which reduced the researchers' ability to infer any real differences in the recidivism of the two groups.

Other Outcomes

Several studies have suggested that teen courts may have effects on youth other than reduced recidivism. These potential benefits include client satisfaction with the teen court experience (Colydas and McLeod, 1997; McLeod, 1999; Reichel and Seyfrit, 1984; Swink, 1998; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998), enhanced perceptions of procedural justice (Butler-Mejia, 1998), improved attitudes toward authority (LoGalbo, 1998; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998), and greater knowledge of the legal system (LoGalbo, 1998; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998).[1]

For example, McLeod's (1999) survey of former teen court participants found that at least 90 percent of youth referred to the Colonie (NY) Youth Court during 1997 and 1998 believed that the experience increased their understanding of the legal system, helped them improve their behavior, and helped them become more responsible. Nearly all survey respondents (95 percent) reported that going through teen court caused them to "make more thoughtful decisions." Nearly three in five (58 percent) reported better communication with their parents, and half (50 percent) reported improved grades in school. However, the study's very low response rate (24 percent of youth surveyed) raised the possibility that the youth responding to the followup survey may have been the most compliant and prosocial youth in the sample.

LoGalbo's (1998) evaluation of the Sarasota County, FL, teen court program also found

(continued on page 14)

[1] Researchers have found that teen court participation is also associated with positive outcomes for youth volunteers. For information about prevention and law related education outcomes for youth volunteers, see Knepper, 1994, 1995; Reichel and Seyfrit, 1984; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998.

Table 5: Findings of Studies on Recidivism Among Former Teen Court Participants

Studies With Comparison Groups	
El Dorado County Superior Court, 1999	
Measures: Uncertain **Data Sources:** Official records **Key Finding:** Measurable, but not significant, difference in favor of teen courts	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Analyzed reoffending by 460 youth handled by Placerville and South Lake Tahoe, CA, teen courts between 1994 and 1999. ◆ Compared teen court cases with cases that were eligible for teen court but referred to juvenile probation instead (n=324). ◆ Seventeen percent of youth diverted to teen court and 27 percent of the comparison group reoffended before the end of the year in which they were referred. ◆ Recidivism of comparison group exceeded that of teen court group for each year during the 5-year period (differences in recidivism ranged from 5 to 15 percentage points). ◆ *Cautions:* Recidivism measures not defined. Possible selection bias—comparison group cases were those not selected for teen court. No standard followup period—analyses fail to control for differential opportunity to reoffend.
North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts, 1995	
Measures: New court referral **Data Sources:** Official records **Key Finding:** Measurable, but not significant, difference in favor of comparison group	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Analyzed subsequent court contacts for youth handled by Cumberland County, NC, teen court between 1993 and 1994 (n=95). ◆ Compared teen court cases with cases processed prior to introduction of teen court but matched to the teen court target population (i.e., demographic factors, offense categories, and admission of guilt). ◆ Twenty percent of teen court cases and 9 percent of comparison group cases recidivated during the 7-month followup period. Groups recidivated in similar timeframes (4.1 and 4.6 months, respectively). ◆ *Cautions:* Possible selection bias—teen court participation was voluntary. No standard followup period—analyses fail to control for differential opportunity to reoffend. "Other" offenses (e.g., traffic, weapons, drug/alcohol) were overrepresented in the teen court sample due to policy changes.
Hissong, 1991	
Measures: Uncertain **Data Sources:** Official records **Key Finding:** Significant difference in favor of teen courts	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Analyzed recidivism (presumably rearrest) among youth referred to Arlington, TX, teen court in 1986 (n=196). Compared time to failure among teen court defendants and a comparison group matched on demographic characteristics and offense. ◆ During followup period, 24 percent of teen court defendants recidivated compared with 36 percent of comparison group (statistically significant; p<0.01). Analysis of a subset of defendants (16-year-old white males) suggested probability of "survival" (i.e., no recidivism) beyond 18 months was greater for teen court youth. ◆ *Cautions:* Recidivism measures not defined. Followup period not defined (probably 24 months)—sample youth may have varying lengths of exposure to recidivism risk. Possible selection bias—teen court participation was voluntary. Separate analysis of subsample not clearly justified. Possible underreporting of recidivism—data not collected in neighboring jurisdictions.
Seyfrit, Reichel, and Stutts, 1987	
Measures: Uncertain **Data Sources:** Official records **Key Finding:** Measurable, but not significant, difference in favor of teen courts	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Tracked recidivism (presumably rearrest) among youth referred to Columbia County, GA, teen court (n=52) during an 18-month period in early 1980's. Comparison group (n=50) matched on demographics, offenses, and case processing procedures. ◆ Ten percent of teen court defendants recidivated, compared with 12 percent of the comparison group. Difference was larger (2 versus 10 percent) when analysis controlled for prior offenses. ◆ *Cautions:* Time at risk of recidivism ranged from 6 to 18 months. Analysis did not control for differential opportunity to reoffend.

Table 5: Findings of Studies on Recidivism Among Former Teen Court Participants (continued)

Post Hoc Studies (No Comparison Groups)

Harrison, Maupin, and Mays, 2000

Measures: Subsequent referral to juvenile probation

Data Sources: Official records

Methods/Findings
- Tracked postprogram recidivism for a sample of youth referred to Dona Ana County, NM, teen court from 1994 to 1998 (*n*=478).
- Twenty-five percent of teen court defendants were referred for new charges between participation in teen court and their 18th birthday.
- Recidivism was higher for youth appearing in teen court during 1994 and 1995 (in excess of 30 percent) than for youth appearing in teen court after 1995 (19 to 25 percent), suggesting that a longer followup period allowed for detection of more recidivism.
- *Cautions:* No comparison group. Recidivism offenses are reported in aggregate totals and cannot be attributed to individual youth. Methods do not control for subjects' varying lengths of exposure to recidivism risk.

Minor et al., 1999

Measures: New court appearance

Data Sources: Official records

Methods/Findings
- Assessed postprogram recidivism (subsequent court appearance for new offense) for 234 youth handled in Kentucky teen courts between 1994 and 1997. Data were obtained for 97 percent of the youth identified for the study.
- Thirty-two percent of teen court defendants appeared in court within 12 months of the teen court hearing.
- Prior offense and certain previous sanctions (e.g., curfew) were associated with a greater likelihood of recidivism.
- *Cautions:* No comparison group. Most of the sample's subsequent court appearances were for minor delinquency charges (e.g., theft, marijuana possession).

Butler-Mejia, 1998

Measures: Rearrest

Data Sources: Official records

Methods/Findings
- Examined postprogram recidivism for a sample of defendants from Montgomery County, MD, teen court (*n*=177).
- Three percent of teen court defendants were rearrested during the 12-month followup period.
- *Cautions:* No comparison group. No analysis of varying time to failure. No controls for possible selection bias. No data collection from large, neighboring jurisdictions.

LoGalbo, 1998

Measures: Rearrest

Data Sources: Official records

Methods/Findings
- Tracked postprogram arrests of youth referred to Sarasota County, FL, teen court between 1997 and 1998 (*n*=111).
- Thirteen percent of teen court defendants were rearrested during 5-month followup.
- Improved attitudes toward self and authority figures (e.g., judges) were associated with lower incidence of recidivism among teen court youth.
- *Cautions:* No comparison group. Insufficient analysis of possible effects of sample attrition.

Swink, 1998

Measures: New police contact

Data Sources: Official records, questionnaires

Methods/Findings
- Tracked postprogram recidivism (subsequent police contact) for 782 youth referred to Onondaga County, NY, youth court between 1995 and 1997.
- Parent reports of youth behavior were also collected.
- Eight percent of teen court defendants recidivated at some point after teen court appearance.
- Recidivism varied for youth handled during 1995 (9 percent), 1996 (9 percent), and 1997 (6 percent). The lower rate for 1997 was likely due to shorter followup.
- *Cautions:* No comparison group. Analysis did not control for differential opportunity to fail or for differences between youth with responding and nonresponding parents.

Table 5: Findings of Studies on Recidivism Among Former Teen Court Participants (continued)

Post-Hoc Studies (continued)	
Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998	
Measures: New court referral **Data Sources:** Official records	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Monitored subsequent court referrals for 55 teen court defendants handled by 18 Kentucky programs from 1994 to 1997. ◆ Thirty-two percent of the teen court defendants recidivated (subsequent court contact for a new offense). ◆ First-time offenders were less likely to recidivate than those with prior offenses. Successful completion of teen court sanctions was less likely for youth with prior offenses, but sanction completion was not correlated with recidivism. ◆ *Cautions:* No comparison group. Significant subject attrition (88 percent of defendants from initial point of data collection) precludes meaningful analysis.
McNeece et al., 1996	
Measures: Uncertain **Data Sources:** Official records	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Monitored caseload, sanctions, and client recidivism associated with Hernando County, FL, teen court during 1995 and 1996. ◆ Researchers describe an analysis of official records that showed 8 percent of teen court youth processed since 1992 recidivated. ◆ *Cautions:* No comparison group. Recidivism was not defined. Sample was not described. Followup period was not specified.
SRA Associates, 1995	
Measures: New intake referral **Data Sources:** Official records	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Documented the number of cases heard, nature of sanctions imposed, and proportion of clients that recidivated after participation in a Santa Rosa, CA, teen court program. ◆ Contacts with juvenile intake were tracked for defendants appearing in teen court between January 1993 and June 1994 (n=238). ◆ Three percent of teen court defendants were again referred to juvenile intake following their appearance in teen court. ◆ *Cautions:* No comparison group. Followup period not defined. Cases likely had varying exposure time for recidivism. Recidivism may be underreported because no data were collected from neighboring jurisdictions.
Rothstein, 1987	
Measures: Uncertain **Data Sources:** Police agency descriptions	**Methods/Findings** ◆ Reported recidivism (presumably rearrest) for 87 youth referred to Odessa, TX, teen court in 1985 for misdemeanor drug and alcohol offenses. ◆ Zero percent recidivism reported among teen court defendants during the 12-month followup period. ◆ *Cautions:* No comparison group. Cases may have had varying lengths of exposure to recidivism risk. Recidivism results were based on claims made by the local police agency and not primary data collection by researchers. No discussion of data collection methods. Limited description of youth sample and selection methods.

Source: The Urban Institute, Evaluation of Teen Courts Project.

(continued from page 11)

that teen court positively affected defendant attitudes toward authority and understanding of the legal process. LoGalbo surveyed 111 youth immediately after their initial interview with teen court staff and again upon completion of the program. The survey asked participants about their knowledge of Florida laws and the justice system, their attitudes toward nine authority figures (e.g., police officer, judge, parent, teacher), their attitudes toward teen court and toward themselves, and their perception of the fairness of teen court procedures. The study found teen court participation was associated with increased self-esteem and positive attitudes toward select authority figures (e.g., judges). The

analysis also suggested that recidivism was less likely among defendants with improved attitudes toward authority figures.

Strong client satisfaction was also reported by researchers in Kentucky. Exit interviews conducted by Wells and colleagues (1998) revealed high levels of satisfaction among 123 teen court participants, with 84 percent indicating that their sentences were fair. Several positive features of the teen court experience were cited by the Kentucky subjects, including "educational advantages" (37 percent) and the actual sentences youth received (21 percent). Teens also consistently indicated that the opportunity to serve as a teen court juror was an important, positive aspect of the teen court process.

Conclusion

State and local jurisdictions across the country are embracing teen court as an alternative to the traditional juvenile justice system for their youngest and least serious offenders. Many jurisdictions report that teen court increases young offenders' respect for the justice system and reduces recidivism by holding delinquent youth accountable for what is often their first offense. Moreover, a teen court may be able to act more quickly and more efficiently than a traditional juvenile court. Researchers are beginning to accumulate a body of findings on the effectiveness of teen courts, but more detailed information is needed for future practice and policy development.

The information discussed in this Bulletin is part of the Evaluation of Teen Courts Project, OJJDP's response to the need for more detailed research about teen courts. The project, which is being conducted for OJJDP by researchers at The Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center, is the first national, multisite evaluation of teen courts and youth courts. Four jurisdictions are participating in the study—Anchorage, AK; Tempe, AZ; Rockville, MD; and Independence, MO. The teen courts in these communities were selected for the study to maximize the number of courtroom models represented, the mix of geographic locations, and the overall quality and length of service of each program. The project features a quasi-experimental design with data in each jurisdiction being collected on a group of teen court participants and a comparison group of youth handled using traditional juvenile court procedures.

The Evaluation of Teen Courts Project is designed to address some of the key issues facing policymakers and practitioners as they consider investing more heavily in teen court programs in their own jurisdictions. The study will provide answers to the following questions:

- What do teen courts actually do with young offenders?
- What type of sentences are typically imposed on youth, and do the youth comply?
- Are youth and parents satisfied with their experiences in teen court?
- Do young offenders referred to teen courts have lower rates of recidivism than those handled in the traditional juvenile justice system?
- Do juveniles show improved attitudes toward law enforcement and the courts and improved relations with peers and family, and do they have a better understanding of the consequences of their illegal behavior?
- Do these outcomes vary across teen court models and across subsets of offenders?
- Have the most experienced teen courts learned any lessons that can be shared with other jurisdictions?
- What community-level factors contribute to the success of teen courts?

Findings from the entire Evaluation of Teen Courts Project will be available in 2001. Policymakers and practitioners will be able to draw on the study's findings as they consider whether teen courts and youth courts should play a more prominent role in each jurisdiction's system for responding to youthful offenders.

For Further Information

For more information about The Urban Institute, the Justice Policy Center, or the Evaluation of Teen Courts Project, see www.urban.org.

For more information about the National Youth Court Center, see www.youthcourt.net.

For more information about the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, see www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

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